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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent research on children's literacy development and learning, focusing on "emergent literacy" theory. Advocates of emergent literacy believe that children learn to read by reading and to write by writing, and that children are active constructors and investigators of their own knowledge. Recent studies have suggested that most preschool children are aware of how they are learning and, though not able to read, pretend to read by labeling pictures in books. Research in Taiwan has shown that the emphasis on learning the complex forms of Chinese has contributed to Chinese children's drawing style. Comparative studies of both native English speakers and non- or limited-English-speaking preschoolers found that even children who were virtually non-speakers of English could read English print in the environment. The studies reviewed suggest that children become literate by being meaningfully engaged in activities such as reading, writing, speaking, drawing, and play. (Contains 28 references.) (MDM)

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EMERGENT LITERACY AND YOUNG CHILDREN

Yuehkuei Hsu

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Emergent Literacy and Young Children

Research in the past two decades has changed the way we look at children's literacy development and learning. Insights from psychology (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) and linguistics (Chomsky, 1965) have led to the conception of the child as a hypothesis creator, a thinker, and a questioner who over time can unconsciously formulate the rules of language (Edelsky, 1986). Although there is a long history of research in young children's reading and writing, the concept of emergent literacy has become prominent only recently. Clay (1977) suggests that the term "emergent literacy" implies that children "invent literacy" through reading, writing, speaking, drawing, and play, all of which develop concurrently and interrelatedly in young children (Teale & Sulzby, 1987). Advocates of emergent literacy theory believe that children learn to read by reading and to write by writing (Goodman, 1985; Strickland, 1989), and that children are active constructors and investigators of their own knowledge (Clay, 1977; Dyson, 1982; Fields et al., 1991; Halliday, 1977; Harste et al., 1984; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1962; Wieder & Greenspan, 1993).

According to Teale and Sulzby (1986, 1989), several characteristics are delineated about young children as literacy learners: children begin to learn to read and write very early in life; literacy is functional and an integral part of the learning process; reading and writing are interrelated; children are constantly constructing their understanding of how language works; and children learn to write through active engagement with their world. Further, interaction between parents and children in discussing written language is also highly recognized in developing children's independent uses of print (Teale, 1986).

Studies have looked at joint storybook reading, environmental print and the importance of contexts, retelling of stories, attempts to write, and various literacy forms embedded in drawings. When children write, they either scribble, invent, or spell conventionally. Children who discover their world through exploring writing know more

than children who are simply taught about letters (Clay, 1987). Stewart and Mason (1989) explore preschool children's awareness about literacy. They found that most children are aware of how they are learning and, though not able to read, they pretend to read by labeling pictures in the book. Stewart and Mason's study indicates that the variations in children's literacy awareness are related to the instruction provided in school and the quality of home support for literacy. Other studies have looked at children's drawing as preparatory stages for the development of writing (Bissex, 1980; Dyson, 1982; Platt, 1977; Zalusky, 1982). Vygotsky (1978) suggests that, in early representational writing, children directly denote objects or events through graphics. He claims that children must learn that one can draw objects as well as language. Given this proposed significance of drawing in the development of early writing, Dyson (1982) examines the relationship between children's drawing and early writing. Dyson (1982), during a three-month period, observed kindergarten children's verbal and nonverbal behaviors daily during the processes of drawing and writing. Data was collected through systematic participant observation, child interviews and their graphic products. The findings imply that writing and drawing relate closely to each other and that learning to write is a process of differentiating and consolidating the separate meanings of these two forms of graphic symbolism--drawing and writing.

Alland (1983) investigated children's drawing in six cultures. In examining children's drawings in Taiwan, the researcher found that the emphasis on learning the complex forms of Chinese has contributed to Chinese children's drawing style. Children in Taiwan tend to draw units rather than use simple marks. Thus, Alland suggests that Taiwanese children's picture making is influenced by the relationship between pictorial representation and writing.

The previous studies show that children, rather than proceeding through a hierarchy of skills, move in and out of various stages. This parallels Vygotsky's view (1978) that development is spiral rather than hierarchical (Knupfer, 1992). Several attempts have been

made to classify stages in children's writing development. Fields (1989) identifies six stages of written language development: scribbling, linear/repetitive, letter-like forms, letters and early word symbols, invented spelling, and standard spelling. Mason et al. (1989) also delineate 10 rankings of children's writing, from no response and picture-related to event-related and story-related sentences.

In addition to studies which look at English speaking children, several studies have paid special attention to non-English-speaking children's literacy development. Some evidence shows that if children receive reading and writing instruction in the first language before second language literacy instruction begins, they have higher reading scores than those who receive no literacy instruction in their first languages (Edelsky, 1986).

Goodman (1980) may be the first person to investigate the print awareness of preschool preliterate children including both native English speakers and non- or limited English-speaking children. She found that even children who were virtually non-speakers of English could read English print in the environment. Likewise, Hudelson (1984), by using repeated interviews and observations to examine ESL children's reading development in English, found that even children with virtually little or no English read environmental print in English, that ESL children can write English for various purposes early in their development of English, and that the experiential and cultural background of ESL children has a strong influence on their reading comprehension. The implication of this study is that teachers should encourage ESL children to interact with the environment and use their background knowledge and living environment for literacy experiences. In addition, they should create meaningful contexts where children can respond and recognize that mistakes are necessary and play an important role in children's development and acquisition of a second language.

Hsu's (1994) study of a 5-year-old Taiwanese child learning English in the United States confirms the above findings. Utilizing participant observations and interviews with teachers, parents, and the child, this study examined the child's English literacy behaviors

in the classroom and the home settings for four months. The data collected from the writing samples and the child's performance in English literacy activities support the theoretical premise that children learn a second language through many authentic and meaningful language experiences, and that children's understanding and use of a second language are influenced by their unique cultural characteristics and through various social interactions with significant others surrounding them. The findings suggest that emergent literacy theory is applicable in teaching Chinese children English in the United States.

The above studies either focus on children's drawing and writing processes or English and non-English speaking children learning English in the United Sates. These studies suggest that children become literate by being meaningfully engaged in activities such as reading, writing, speaking, drawing, and play.

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